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## PROMOTION BY SUBJECT AND THREE-YEAR COURSES<sup>1</sup>

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The higher education has been much discussed. The lower education deserves special attention. Who can be more interested in its development than the superintendents, principals, and teachers assembled here? Any possible improvement in courses or in methods is in the interest of the masses who may never reach the higher education. As the altruistic and social-service conceptions of the twentieth century win acceptance, interest in the betterment of the lower classes deepens, and the great leaders of thought in the nation and in our state are alive to this evolution.

"The three fundamental things for the improvement of education up to the age of eighteen," wrote President Eliot, "are (1) the extension downward of departmental teaching; (2) the earlier introduction of many subjects now reserved for the high school; and (3) the promotion or advancement of the individual pupil by subject and not by the year or the half-year."

"The greatest problem we have to solve in our great system," said Superintendent Maxwell to the principals of Manhattan and the Bronx, "is to reach the individual and to help the slow pupil. I may say that we are on the verge—I won't say more—but we are on the verge of solving this problem, and by a method which will revolutionize the public-school system of this country.

The public-school system, magnificent as it is in very many respects, needs to be revolutionized. Especially is this true in large cities, where abuses have crept in. An irrepressible conflict is going on between the system and the child. The tendency has been to sacrifice the child to system; now it is more gener-

<sup>1</sup> A paper read before the annual meeting of the State Teachers' Association in Syracuse, N. Y., on December 28, 1906.

ally recognized that system must yield to the child. The school is sometimes likened to a home. In the home we do not classify the children. In the school we have done too much classifying. Ease of classification must give way to the needs of the individual child.

Nature has not made children alike, nor is she fitting them for the same experiences and destiny. As teachers our greatest duty is to adapt ourselves to individual needs. The continuous advancement of John or William, of Grace or Mary, is of vastly more importance than statistics regarding them all.

About a year ago, in referring to a discussion of three-year courses and promotion by subjects which appeared in the *Educational Review* for September, 1905, under the title of "Economy in Education," President Butler, the editor, wrote: "The agitation should be kept up both in New York and elsewhere until something is accomplished. I should think it perfectly possible and very desirable to adopt the point system in dealing with secondary-school pupils." In a letter dated December 18, 1906, Associate Superintendent Edward L. Stevens, in charge of all high schools in Greater New York, writes me: "The scheme of promoting by points will undoubtedly go through this month. We have agreed upon a required minimum of 150 points. The only point at issue now is as to the amount of required mathematics." By a point is meant one recitation a week for a half-year. Promoting by points carries with it, of course, promotion by subjects, which in many New York City high schools is already becoming the prevailing method. The high schools for boys in Manhattan and in Brooklyn, and some of the mixed high schools, have already adopted this method. The schools which seem most reluctant to fall into line are the great high schools in Manhattan and Brooklyn which make a specialty of supplying young women to the training-schools for teachers; but even in these conservative institutions, with five thousand girls as students, special programmes are gaining headway. Many teachers hesitate to say anything for quotation, but when guaranteed protection they say they favor promotion by subject instead of the rigid grade system which is largely responsible for the high per-

centage of school mortality indicated in school reports. It is to be hoped that such expedients as permission to sit in the same room, while recitation goes on, without repeating a subject in which a satisfactory mark has been received, is only a transition stage to full permission to take the next term's work of that subject in another room; also that the system of repeating a term's work in some subject in two different rooms of the same grade may yield to the better plan of repeating unsatisfactory work with only one teacher, and attempting on probation the next grade of that subject with another teacher on the understanding that the lower work may be dropped after the mid-term examinations, in case both grades of work in the meantime are successfully maintained. Thus may the responsibility for failure be placed squarely upon the pupil.

A year ago about three thousand pupils in New York City high schools were repeating subjects in which they had already passed. This estimated number has been much reduced, but in certain schools this evil has not yet been overcome. How far the idea is entertained that to repeat work satisfactorily done in science and English will operate to induce pupils to make up deficiencies in Latin and mathematics it is impossible to state, but that the method is a failure is abundantly illustrated. The number of pupils who have abandoned school because of the pressure of such rules is very great. In the words of Professor E. L. Thorndike, of Teachers College, Columbia University, who has gathered most elaborate statistics along this line:

Approximately four-fifths of those who enter leave before graduating, and the leaving is fairly steady throughout the high-school period. There is not, as in the college mortality, a specially strong tendency to leave at the end of the first year, nor as in the college a tendency to stay through the final year, if the other years have been completed. The mortality is greater in the case of boys than of girls, though not very much so.

The belief that much of this school mortality might easily be prevented has been frequently expressed of late in articles and letters in the metropolitan press. This has been true of Philadelphia as well. The *Public Ledger* and the *Philadelphia Press* have taken strong editorial attitude. The *New York Times*,

the *Evening Post*, and the *Brooklyn Eagle* have also done good service in the cause of flexible grading. .

During this agitation several hundred letters have been received from educators in various parts of the country. College presidents and professors, superintendents, principals, and teachers have shared the discussion. Let me quote from Philadelphia, Boston, and New York.

William W. Birdsall, principal of the High School for Girls in Philadelphia, wrote some months ago:

I have been laboring during my three years' connection with this school for some modification of our promotion rules. There is a growing sentiment among our teachers in favor of a more rational system, and I hope that we shall be able to accomplish something before the opening of another school year. I hope that we shall be able to secure the adoption of a rule which will not require the repetition of 76 per cent. of a year's work because 24 has been below the standard. The matter has been under discussion by several principals of the high schools, and was recently considered at a round-table meeting of high-school teachers. This round table developed so much interest in the subject that a committee of teachers from all the high schools is in process of formation, in the hope that the matter can be worked out to a practical solution.

William H. Mearns, president of the Philadelphia Teachers' Association, wrote last September:

Two questions have been uppermost with me. I should like to know what proportion of the pupils that leave school are recruited from those who are compelled to repeat tasks once satisfactorily finished; and I should like to know what percentage of "left down" pupils are promoted the following term. I fancy that the "stale freshman," as we call him here, finds the work stale and unprofitable, and quits it; and I suspect, as well, that our system of dealing with weak pupils (i. e., sending them back a year) is not successful. In the investigation which we made last April (the report of which you noted in the *Ledger*) we asked for the number of hours (periods) once satisfactorily done that were being repeated. We then, as you know, translated "keeping step" hours into teachers. We discovered that the Central High School was employing the equivalent of six teachers *to grind sharp saws!*

Dr. Paul H. Hanus, professor of the history and art of teaching at Harvard University, wrote in part as follows:

To my mind the only rational scheme of promotion throughout a pupil's entire school career is promotion by single subjects and not by groups

of subjects. It is no more difficult to organize a school so that pupils are graded by subjects than by groups of subjects; and the larger the school—i. e., the more parallel classes or sections there are in each subject—the easier it is. It is only necessary to have the recitations in a given subject, say arithmetic, at the same time. No pupil, whether in the lower grades or in the high-school grades, should be required to take again a study in which he has already obtained a satisfactory grade. There is no justification whatever for such a requirement.

Principal George C. Mann, of the West Roxbury High School, and secretary of the Headmasters' Association, comprising the twelve principals of high and Latin schools in Boston, wrote in October last:

We are at present enjoying the freedom of promotion by subjects (represented by "points"). We are unanimous, I think, in preferring this method to the old way.

Dr. Andrew W. Edson, associate superintendent of schools in New York City, last March expressed the administrative attitude in the following vigorous fashion:

I am in thorough sympathy with the proposition to promote pupils by subjects. If a pupil has completed any subject satisfactorily, there is no good reason why he should be required to repeat work in that subject. He can better spend his time in some advanced work. I consider it good policy to recognize quality, as well as quantity, and thus to give extra credit for specially meritorious work. All of the objections that may be raised against this plan are trivial. Organization, management, and bookkeeping in any school should be made to conform to the general plan of advancing pupils in subjects as fast as their ability and application will warrant. To principals who are inclined to question the advisability of carrying into execution the principle involved, I suggest the propriety of trying to find ways and means of advancing this proposition rather than of raising objections to the same.

Associate Superintendent Edward L. Stevens writes:

I am perfectly willing to be quoted as favoring any plan in our high schools which will help the individual pupil.

Teachers in private schools, evening schools, and country schools will with difficulty understand the exact situation in large city schools. To prove the need for this agitation I will not mention scores of cases in other schools of which I know, but simply state the occasion of my entering upon this campaign. A year ago last February I found in one class of thirty

pupils assigned to me for instruction in English eighteen who had just been informed that their marks for the previous semester had ranged from the passing mark to 19 per cent. above. Six of these had been passed by myself and twelve by other teachers. In other words, because these eighteen boys were deficient in two other subjects, as Latin and science, or mathematics, they were condemned, and I with them, to thresh out old straw for the next half-year. In justice to the twelve other boys who had not taken that grade of study I must keep close to the syllabus. Every effort must be made along the line of supplementary reading, new methods, and new illustrations to keep these eighteen who had already passed from the temptation to mental inactivity, if not disgust. With 60 per cent. of the class condemned to repeat five months' work which had been already passed, my indignation arose against the rules which we were literally obeying. President Butler had invited me to write an article elaborating the idea of the intermediate school. To what I had agreed to write I added eight pages on promotion by subjects. The article appeared in September, 1905. President Eliot indorsed the second part. Superintendent Maxwell requested some of the principals to try this method of promotion. Drs. Mickleborough and Buchanan were among the first of New York principals to place their schools firmly on this basis, and to them primarily the credit is due for any progress in flexible grading which has since resulted in New York City. They have proved the entire practicability of the scheme—and its practicability is the main point of attack by its opponents. Some principals have since given the impression that they have always promoted in this way. Taxpayers, parents, teachers, and pupils are heartily in sympathy with the change being made.

I need not here refer to the severe things which have been said and done in this long-drawn-out controversy. I have publicly characterized the repeating of work already satisfactorily done as "a wicked waste of the time and energy of pupils and teachers alike and of the money of taxpayers." At the outset, in a discussion before the Schoolmasters' Association of New York and Vicinity, I declared that "the time will soon come when it

will be regarded as pedagogically immoral to oblige a boy or a girl to take over again a term's work in a subject in which he or she has already clearly passed, as it is pedagogically immoral to permit a pupil to go on without review in a subject in which he has failed."

The evils of the old system are not all understood. Difficulties of programme-making in our schools have been the excuse for rules of promotion vicious in their operation. When pupils are obliged to repeat subjects in which they have passed because they have failed in other subjects, they have sometimes lost interest in what they had already accomplished, and then been obliged to take the entire term's work a third time since they had failed the second time they took it on what they had once passed. How can really progressive principals attempt to condone so frightful a waste? Any private school which put in operation rules of promotion now partially ignored, but not yet rescinded, in New York City would shortly be obliged to close its doors. It is my distinct purpose, if possible, to arouse the public, not only in New York, but in other states and cities, to demand that each pupil, in high school at least, shall be promoted, advanced, and graduated according to proficiency in each of certain numbers of required and elective subjects, without the lockstep penitentiary limitations of time and class. The seating, the classification, the statistics of a school are of slight importance compared with the independent advancement of each and every pupil in our care.

Let me illustrate one evil. Dr. Walter B. Gunnison, principal of the Erasmus Hall High School, Brooklyn, is a man of independence. He has not been restricted by rules in which he did not believe. For ten years he has not been deterred from dealing with the individual boy or girl as he saw fit, regardless of rules. If a clause had been appended permitting in special cases more liberal treatment of pupils than the body of the rules allowed, according to the interpretation of nearly every other principal in the city, he would use it to justify his freedom from rules; but, if no such clause existed, he would use his own judgment regarding each case just the same. What was the result?



While the strict constructionists were driving the weaker or one-sided pupils away by a rigorous application of the existing rules approved by the Board of Education May 3, 1904, he was receiving many of them into his school. Within a year he has told me that he had pupils from fifty-one different schools, and that he or his capable assistant arranged a special programme for each. But how about the pupil? Why should he or she be obliged to cross the city to get what ought not to be denied in the nearest school, offering identical courses of study? The old grade system thus gave rise to varying standards for the same kind of work, and was sometimes cleverly played both ways to the imagined advantage of some particular school, but to the real disadvantage of the slow or irregular pupil found in so many families. A crowded school can ease itself by strict grade rules; a new school can fill its rooms by easy promotions. Promotion by subject obviates both the evil of compelling pupils to repeat studies they have satisfactorily completed and that of allowing students to avoid the repeating of subjects in which they have failed, as was true in the now obsolete system of promotion by general average. Ten years' experience in Erasmus Hall High School with hundreds of part-time pupils has proved that promotion by subjects is possible even in most difficult circumstances.

Another principal who has proved the practicableness of promotion by subjects in city schools was the late Oliver D. Clark, of the Curtis High School in Richmond Borough. At a memorial meeting held in his honor this month District Superintendent D. L. Bardwell said of Principal O. D. Clark:

He believed in the promotion of high-school pupils by subject rather than by class, because it was, so he felt, better for the individual student so to do; to believe with him was to act. That such a policy made more work for the principal and teachers had no weight with him; this plan was better for the pupil, and that settled it. I never knew a man who more thoroughly lived the doctrine that schools are maintained first, last, and all the time for the benefit of the pupils attending than did he.

My own opinions, based on experience and cross-section observation of actual conditions for many years, have fortunately been

recently confirmed. If mistaken, I wished to know it, and so early in October I addressed a questionnaire on promotion by subject, and another on three-year courses, to educators throughout the country. Five editions have gone forth, and detailed returns have already come from every state in the Union except Delaware and Nevada; also from New Mexico and Indian Territory, from Canada and Mexico, from Scotland and England. Thus far, besides those who have written letters, 235 superintendents, 182 principals, 32 teachers, 15 college presidents, 19 college professors, 15 normal-school presidents, 5 state superintendents, 7 inspectors, and 2 lecturers have responded to these questions in detail. Among them are the superintendents of schools in St. Louis, Boston, Denver, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, Baltimore, Buffalo, Detroit, Worcester, and Los Angeles.

Regarding these questionnaires Commissioner of Education Elmer Ellsworth Brown wrote in October:

The whole subject is one of great interest, and every experiment such as that to which you call attention, looking to a better care of the needs of individuals, must command the serious attention of those who have to do with American education.

Dr. Michael E. Sadler, whom President Butler once characterized as the W. T. Harris of Great Britain, wrote: "I am very much interested in both your inquiries. Each touches a vital question." Later he said he had called to them the attention of "the chief authorities in London and Liverpool."

Dr. R. Lauth, of Berlin, who according to Dr. Sadler is working out a very interesting comparative study of results in English, French, and German primary schools, writes:

Our present class arrangements are a disgrace both to common-sense and to pedagogy. As long as not every pupil is treated for education on his psychological individuality, so long school must fall far short of its task.

As to the second questionnaire, comparing the present system of four quadrennial courses with a proposed system of five triennial courses, Herr Lauth prefers the latter, "not," he says, "because I care much for mere form, but because I think that even elementary schools should not dismiss their pupils before the age of fifteen. As to mental development," he adds, the "stages

should be fitted not to suit age, but attainments and capacity, which demand brings us back to the needs of sensible classification."

"From what I know of genetic psychology," writes Professor Earl Barnes from England, "I should say the system B," covering five three-year periods, "met the periods of a child's life better than A," the present system.

It is impossible within the limits of this paper to indicate the mass of facts and opinions given in these twenty thousand answers to questions. They are being carefully studied and tabulated, and conclusions are being formulated by a subcommittee of the Committee on School Problems of the Brooklyn Teachers' Association, which, under the aggressive, energetic, and indefatigable leadership of President Lyman A. Best, is as jealous of the rights of pupils as of teachers. This outspoken, unflinching principal has combined with the able and enterprising president of our state association, Dr. Charles O. Dewey, here to bring these vital topics to the consideration of those specially interested in the youth of our state.

Though utterly unable to go into detail, I am glad to state that the responses I have so far received strongly confirm the position taken by Dr. E. W. Lyttle, state inspector of high schools at Albany. Dr. Lyttle writes:

My own notion is that first we must separate elementary and academic instruction into six years each. Let the mechanics of education be taken in the first six years; insist that a pupil shall have mastered the mechanics of reading, penmanship, number, and spelling, and incidentally shall have acquired as much general information as may be. But the test for admission to the high school should be a test purely of power, and of memory only so far as power is involved. Then in the last six years we could in the high school plan and carry forward progressive courses of study, differentiating widely in the last two or three years of the high-school course. If I am correct in my opinion, the work of the elementary school is largely a work of unification; the work of the high school should be largely a work of differentiation. My whole feeling is this, that we must emphasize the vital difference between the purposes of elementary and secondary education. Failure to recognize this difference, as well as failure to recognize similarity, is responsible for much poor work and for the dropping-off in the grammar grades and in the first year of high school.

At the meeting of the National Educational Association at Asbury Park it was

*Resolved*, That a standing committee of five members of the Department of Secondary Education be appointed by the president elected in 1905 to consider the question of dividing the twelve years given elementary and secondary education equally between elementary and secondary schools.

The chairman of this committee is Principal G. B. Morrison, of the William McKinley High School in St. Louis. I sincerely hope that this association will co-operate in every possible way with Dr. Lyttle and Principal Morrison.

In general over five hundred sets of answers show that the West is as fully alive as the East, with the exception possibly of Massachusetts and New York. The South is far behind. From Chicago, Superintendent E. G. Cooley writes:

It is the practice in the Chicago public schools to promote pupils from one grade to another whenever they are ready for the higher grade, and this practice is generally encouraged, not only as to classes, but as to individuals as well. There are two promotions from the elementary schools to the high schools, and two times for graduating from the high schools during the year. I give below the number of promotions at the close of each month of last year beginning with September.

From this table I gather that over 46,000 promotions in Chicago last year were made in the eight months other than January and June, when the regular semi-annual promotions occur. This is over 23 per cent. of the entire number for the year, and speaks well for flexibility in Chicago schools. Chicago as well as Boston already has promotion by points in her public high schools.

Regarding the other questionnaire, Horace Z. Wilber, professor of administration in the Kansas State Normal School at Emporia writes:

I am much in favor of the system proposed by Plan B.<sup>1</sup> Especially do I like this below the college. I think the triennial system would go a long way toward keeping pupils in school who are inclined to drop out under the present quadrennial system. There is also a decided gain in the fact that it eliminates a large amount of needless "marking time" in school work.

<sup>1</sup> Plan B—Proposed system of five three-year courses for primary, intermediate, grammar, and high schools, and for college. The present system of liberal education comprises four quadrennial courses above the kindergarten.

While on the face of matters it appears that the period of preparation is shortened by a year, yet the time is not lost, but rather is saved by getting rid of repetitions. The bringing of departmental teaching down below the high school has much to recommend it. I think it would keep a lot of pupils in school who now feel that they have got to a stopping place at the close of the eighth year, and that there is little left for them. The compulsory-education age being coincident with that of the grades below the high school would insure pupils getting a start in what are now designated as high-school subjects, and consequently would have a tendency to keep them in high-school work, as my experience has been that pupils drop out at the close of the eighth year quite largely because they do not see the value of the high-school work, and because they often think it is altogether too difficult to be undertaken by them. Placing a year of the high-school work in the grammar-school period will go a long way toward overcoming these difficulties. I think the students would not be too much crowded with work by this arrangement. I also think that it offers better opportunity for grouping subjects. I do not think that the proposed plan would in any way cheapen the high-school or college courses. In the interests of educational economy and progress I favor the Plan B proposed.

I am following the trend of the opinions expressed in the majority of the answers received when I say:

1. That school education should not be divided into three periods of four years each as at present, but into two periods of six years each. The subdividing into three-year courses depends on local conditions.

2. That thus secondary education should be extended downward to six years.

3. That departmental teaching should extend throughout the six years of secondary education.

4. That during the seventh and possibly eighth years, or the first and second years of the second six, a semi-departmental system—i.e., one in which each teacher takes two subjects instead of one—may suffice.

5. That promotion be made by subjects throughout the six years of secondary education.

It is a well-known fact that principals of small high schools in towns, with few assistants and practically the same course of study, manage, in some way, to make a programme which avoids repeating subjects already satisfactorily passed. If they can, the

city principals can. The coming February term is none too soon to put such a programme into operation.

Superintendent Maxwell has done many things for New York City. Not the least is the unifying influence of the so-called Maxwell examinations which have standardized high-school work. I am glad that the authorities at Albany recognize the beneficent results and have taken measures to extend the system over the state.

We are in the days of wise supervision and of co-operation between state and city school officials. But are not the topics I have here suggested also worthy of consideration? Differentiation is as important as unification. Flexible grading will result in adapting the courses of study to the needs and capacities of individual pupils, thus rendering the studies pursued as beneficial to the masses who never can go to college as to the few who do. It has been stated in Syracuse that only six of every hundred pupils in elementary schools ever enter high school, and only one of these six ever enters college. More and more must educators keep in mind the wants of the great majority. We must yield to the public necessity. The great problems of getting school buildings and adequate appropriations have so occupied the attention of school authorities that these matters seem to many to be petty details. But success depends on capacity for details. I have known many cases in which school careers were wrecked on the inflexibility of rules conscientiously applied. Away with rules the application of which works disaster to our girls and boys! This is a deliberate movement for the liberation of the lower education. It tends to improve teaching by giving the masses greater power over their own destinies, even though they may be youth and children. I appeal to those in highest authority in the grandest of all states to give these matters the serious consideration the needs of the child demand.